

Choosing between a table and a graph

Tom Lang, in his book, *How to Write, Publish, & Present in the Health Sciences*, discusses three decisions that need to be made in order to determine whether the data to be presented are best presented in tabular or graphic form.

These three decisions are

- “What level of detail do you want to show?”
- “Do you want to help readers analyze or reference information?”
- “Do you want to show exact values or patterns in the values?”

These three decisions should be made within the context of the overarching purpose of the data display.

Level of detail

“Data can be described at one of three levels of detail.”

- Values
- Groups
- Comparisons

Analysis vs. reference

“Helping readers see general patterns is an *analytic function* of data display, and helping them find specific data faster is a *reference function*.”

Exact values vs. patterns

In general, information designers should use tables when readers need to extract exact values from the display and graphs when readers need to see patterns.